PC: *The Pipeline of Book Censorship*, <https://tavaana.org>

How the Chinese Censors Highlight Fundamental Problems in Academic Publishing

Choosing Pathways to Validity and Relevance for Chinese Politics Research

Nicholas Loubere and Ivan Franceschini

Heads of major international organisations and world-famous actresses are not all that has been disappearing in China in recent months. According to a complaint recently posted online by several scholars, Springer Nature—the world’s largest academic publisher—is guilty of removing ‘politically sensitive’ content published in the *Transcultural Research* book series from their Chinese website at the request of the Chinese authorities (MCLC 2018). When confronted by the editors of the series, the publisher countered that they were merely following local laws and pointed to the fact that Chinese sales had increased in the wake of the act of self-censorship. This craven willingness to submit to censorship once again highlights the fact that

academic freedom and integrity are simply incompatible with the current structure of the commercial academic publishing industry.

We have been here before, and not that long ago. In August 2017 the academic community was scandalised by the revelation that Cambridge University Press (CUP) had capitulated to the Chinese censors, blocking access to 315 articles in the prestigious journal *The China Quarterly* (Phillips 2017). At that time, this act of censorship was met with widespread protest and threats of a boycott, with CUP eventually reversing its decision (Kennedy and Phillips 2017). The CUP incident was a dramatic demonstration of both China's increasing assertiveness and confidence, and the lengths that academic publishers are willing to go to in order to maintain access to the Chinese market. Unsurprisingly, it was later discovered that CUP was not alone, as anonymous interviews with commercial publishers revealed widespread practices of self-censorship in China (AFP 2017).

In October 2017 Springer Nature itself had admitted to 'limiting' at least 1,000 articles on their Chinese website at the request of the Chinese government. At that time the publisher declared: 'We do not believe that it is in the interests of our authors, customers, or the wider scientific and academic community, or to the advancement of research for us to be banned from distributing our content in China'.

In October 2017 Springer Nature itself had admitted to 'limiting' at least 1,000 articles on their Chinese website at the request of the Chinese government. At that time the publisher declared: 'We do not believe that it is in the interests of our authors, customers, or the wider scientific and academic community, or to the advancement of research for us to be banned from distributing our content in China' (Reuters 2017). The most recent incident reveals that Springer Nature has not only refused to change their position with regard to this self-censorship over the past year, but that they are willing to continue working at the bequest of the Chinese censors in order to maintain their position in the Chinese market.

Unlike with CUP, there has not been the same level of outrage or a concerted global campaign targeting Springer Nature. The editors of *Transcultural Research* hope to change that. They have discontinued their agreement with the publisher and have called for the academic community 'to take all the steps necessary' to make it clear that this behaviour is unacceptable. However, up until now the story has failed to gain much traction in the media, and it seems that a full-scale boycott of publishers that engage in such practices is not forthcoming.

On the surface, this apathetic response to the erosion of the core value of academic freedom by one of the main global players in the sector is puzzling. However, it should be understood in the wider context of the academy's acquiescence to commercial modes of publishing that have turned the dissemination of scientific results into a highly profitable and exploitative

business. Springer was at the forefront of the commercial revolution that in the post-WWII period saw academic publishing transformed from a varied landscape of small-scale journals and books published by a variety of institutions or professional societies, into a vast market raking in higher profits than Google, Apple, and Amazon. This profit is achieved through a ‘triple-pay system’ where the public: a) funds the research; b) funds the salaries of the authors, editors, and peer-reviewers; and c) purchases the published output through university library subscriptions (Buranyi 2017). To make matters worse, the research is then locked behind outrageously expensive paywalls, making it inaccessible to the public that financed it in the first place (Monbiot 2018). This system blocks access to academic research much more efficiently than any government censorship regime could dream of (Loubere and Franceschini 2017).

While the current situation is obviously absurd, particularly considering that the Internet allows for the easy and cheap dissemination of scientific findings, it is nevertheless a status quo that has proven very difficult to effectively contest. While there are open access movements, they often seek to operate through the existing publishing system, rather than outside it, for instance by paying publishers for the right to put articles online without any restriction.

The profit-oriented publishing industry has been highly effective in limiting the space available to challenge its domination. Commercial entities control the journals, the citation indexes, and the official ‘impact factors’ that are used to rank journals. The ability to publish in the ‘top journals’—as defined by this system—is crucial in order to find an academic job, achieve tenure, get promoted, and successfully apply for funding (Heckman and Moktan 2018). Additionally, the number of articles published in top journals plays an important role in the university ranking systems (which are also commercially owned). This has made it extremely difficult for academics to extricate themselves from exploitative relationships with publishers like Springer Nature.

While the current situation is obviously absurd, particularly considering that the Internet allows for the easy and cheap dissemination of scientific findings, it is nevertheless a status quo that has proven very difficult to effectively contest.

In this context, where academic subjugation to profit-oriented publishers is the normal state of affairs, we should not be so surprised at the indifference with which Springer Nature’s candid admission of profit-driven self-censorship was met. After all, in a market system that prizes profits above all

This is a harsh reality to confront, but one that we must face up to if we are to properly understand what these incidents mean for the future of academic publishing.

else, this decision makes perfect sense. Even the challenges to CUP and now Springer Nature fail to address the fundamental reasons that academic publishers are casually jettisoning the supposedly sacred value of academic freedom in the search for higher profits. Calls to boycott publishers in order to threaten their bottom line might work if their commercial interests are actually threatened by the boycott, but it only does so by feeding into the same profit-seeking mechanisms that prompted the bad behaviour in the first place. It does not deal with the fundamental crisis in academic publishing—that profit-oriented publishers will prioritise profit at the expense of core academic values.

This is a harsh reality to confront, but one that we must face up to if we are to properly understand what these incidents mean for the future of academic publishing. We are now in a new normal, where academic publishers willingly and unapologetically capitulate to the interests of powerful actors in order to maintain market access. It is not enough to just react to outrageous incidents or engage in isolated boycotts against individual publishers. The only option is to collectively extract ourselves from the exploitative relationships that undermine our academic values and to reclaim academic publishing through truly open, free, and non-profit-oriented modes of academic dissemination. ■